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IN SENATE FLOOR SPEECH, RUBIO EXPLAINS HIS IMMIGRATION PUSH

By Ashley Parker
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When the Senate votes this week on legislation that would revamp the nation's immigration laws, perhaps the most watched vote will be the one cast by Senator Marco Rubio, Republican of Florida and a prominent Hispanic voice in his party.

On Wednesday, Mr. Rubio, an author of the bipartisan bill being debated, took to the Senate floor to explain — and at times defend — his involvement in the largest immigration overhaul in decades.

Mr. Rubio, who was elected to the Senate in 2010 on a Tea Party wave, began by acknowledging all of the phone calls and e-mail messages — not always happy ones, he noted — that he had received in recent weeks from conservatives and Tea Party activists from around the country. These constituents, he said, were “patriots” — not “anti-immigrant” or “close-minded” people, as some pro-immigration advocates have called them.

Then, Mr. Rubio turned to the current immigration system.

“We have a badly broken legal immigration system,” he said. “And we have 11 million people living in this country illegally in de facto amnesty.”

Mr. Rubio has been closely watched throughout the entire process, and he has explained (and re-explained) his legislation to conservative television and radio hosts, not to mention his colleagues in both the Senate and the House. On Wednesday he offered further explanation as to why he chose to get involved with a bill to overhaul the nation's immigration laws.

“This isn't about becoming a Washington dealmaker,” he said. “Truthfully, it would have been a lot easier to just sit back, vote against any proposal and give speeches about how I would have done it differently.”

“And finally,” he added, “this certainly isn't about gaining support for future office. Many commentators and leaders, people who I deeply respect and with whom I agree on virtually every other issue, are disappointed about my involvement in this debate.”

Indeed, in addition to frustrating many conservatives and Tea Party activists, Mr. Rubio split with his mentor — former Senator Jim DeMint of South Carolina, who is now leading the charge against Mr. Rubio's bill from his perch at the Heritage Foundation — on the topic of immigration.

“I got involved in this issue for one simple reason,” Mr. Rubio said. “I ran for office to try and fix things that are hurting this special country, and in the end, that's what this is about for me — trying to fix a serious problem that faces America.”